

# MUSICAL NOTES and COMMENT

## History of the Music of Liszt in New York

### A Surprise for Dr. Dvorak— Record of the Philharmonic and Other Societies.

A story used to be told, some thirty years ago, to the effect that, in conversation with an admirer who was deplored the fact that he had found so few opportunities to hear Liszt's orchestral music, the composer remarked: "If you want to hear my music you must go to New York. I should myself like to hear it performed the way it is performed there." It is possible, likely, that the story is apocryphal; but it was not far from the truth. Of course, foreign records are not as readily accessible as local, but one does not need to be either a very old or a very profound student of musical conditions in the principal artistic cities of the world to realize that the energy which used to be more characteristic of American activity than it is now was exhibited in other fields besides the commercial. Few things have been more amusing to the veteran observer in musical affairs than to note the amazement which comes into the countenance of a foreign conductor who has come to the United States with the conviction that he is the first missionary in high class music when he is told that all of his intended revelations are threadbare in New York. The writer recalls a meeting with Dr. Dvorak when he came to become director of the National Conservatory of Music. In some mysterious way the notion had got into his head that The Tribune's reviewer had acted as a sort of wet nurse or sponsor for his music in America, and he bubbled over with expressions of gratitude. To set him right the Tribune man began to enumerate the titles of his compositions and tell about how long before his coming to New York they had figured on American programmes. "Yes," interrupted Mr. Kneisel, who was sitting in the party, "and I have played your quintet with double bass." "What?" cried the composer, "the quintet with double bass? I have never heard that myself." And then, confidently, "It was a prize composition, and I wrote five gulden for it."

Dr. Dvorak did not come to New York to take charge of one of the city's concert organizations, but he represented the attitude toward our musical status occupied by the majority of European (Continental) musicians and writers in music then and now. Liszt was bound to know something to the contrary, for he could not be ignorant of the fact that all of his large orchestral works had been heard in New York long before they had found their way into the concert schemes of most of the capitals of Europe. This is not hard to understand nor does it necessarily speak for the culture of the local musical public, quite the contrary, for the less knowledge, the less conservatism; the less familiarity with the approved old, the less prejudice against the new; the less reverence for absolute beauty, represented by the classics, the greater the readiness to accept the new with its appeals to the superficial sensibilities, the things which make an elemental appeal. The popular attitude is the same now with respect to the new gods that prevailed then with respect to Liszt. He could always reach the nervous centres quicker than Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven, and he was accepted not because the people knew too much about Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, but because they knew too little. It is only a really cultured public that is conservative in art.

How well was Liszt known in New York a generation ago? Better than now in one respect; that is, his music was often played. And a decade or two before that? Better still. What pianists did with his paraphrases and other solo compositions fifty years ago cannot be said out of hand. It is a fair presumption, however, that even in the field in which he was supreme he was long admitted more for his transcriptions than for his original works. But his orchestral compositions, his symphonic poems, were played often in New York forty years ago than they are now. Here we may consult the records of the Philharmonic Society for all the evidence, for it was this society which first gave a hearing to his orchestral works in America and to which he bore the relation of an honorary member from 1873 till his death. He was elected to the distinction in the same year with Richard Wagner, and it is something of a coincidence that all of the letters of acknowledgment received from their distinguished predecessors only those of Wagner and Liszt were still preserved in the archives of the society when this writer wrote the Memorial History of the Philharmonic in 1872. There were very respectable musicians among those predecessors: Spohr and Mendelssohn, as composers; Vieuxtemps, Ole Bull, Bottesini, Herz, Silveri and Thalberg among instrumental virtuosos, and Jenny Lind, Henriette Sontag, Marietta Alboni and Mme. La Grange among singers—and no doubt Liszt meant what he said when he writes:

"Beginning your comments to the president and conductor of the society, my most obedient thanks, I am, with much respect, yours, F. LISZT." September 15, 1872, Weimar.

With sincere appreciation, I reply to the honorable distinction, represented by the diploma of the Philharmonic Society, New York. This diploma is rendered especially valuable to me by the words expressive of the love which prompted it, viz., "By his many compositions, his symphonic poems, his 'Faust' and other works, he has rendered great services to the arts and their connoisseurs." In the acts of the Philharmonic Society in performing many of his works.

Beginning your comments to the president and conductor of the society, my most obedient thanks, I am, with much respect, yours,

F. LISZT.

September 15, 1872, Weimar.

When Liszt wrote thus to the Philharmonic Society eight of his symphonic poems had already had places on the programmes of the Philharmonic Society, and some of them had already been repeated several times; both his pianoconcertos had been played at Philharmonic concerts, and even his "Dante" Symphony, a movement from his mass, written for the dedication of the cathedral at Gran, and a portion of his "St. Elizabeth"—works that are all but unknown to the present generation—had been given a hearing. The pioneer in this labor of making Liszt's music known was Carl Bergmann, who may have played a few works, not specifically identified by the remark "first time" but noted as "first time by the society," in concerts of the Germania Orchestra, of which he became a member on his arrival in America, in 1859. He began conducting concerts for the Philharmonic Society in 1855, first in alternation with Theodor Eisele, and then solely in 1856. His propaganda for Liszt in the society began in 1856, on March 26 of which year the name of the Hungarian master appeared on one of its programmes for the first time. On that date R. Mills played the transcription of themes from Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream" music. This is not largely significant except in connection with the fact that Liszt's first popularity is as a transcriber. Several of his original orchestral numbers had been produced before the solo performers abandoned the arrangements of works by Beethoven, Weber, Schubert and Mendelssohn's "Promethee," Liszt, in favor of the concertos. At the very next concert, at which the name of Liszt appeared on a Philharmonic scheme associated with that of Mendelssohn, Mr. Bergmann, or the

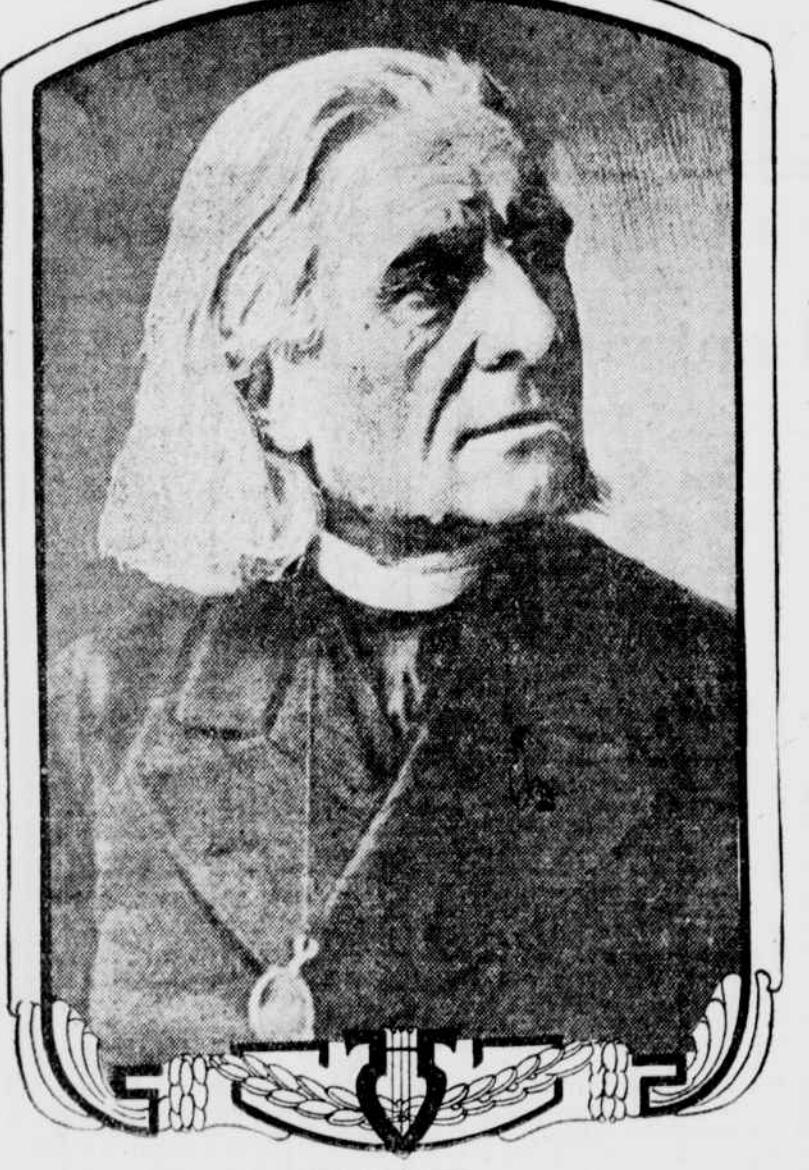


Facsimile of LISZT'S SONG, "ACH, WAS IST LEBEN DOCH SO SCHWER!"

his disciple Thomas they can have stood small chance with the symphony lovers of New York. The "Faust" Symphony is in a somewhat different case. Mr. Thomas produced the "Gretchen" movement out of it at a Philharmonic on March 9, 1858, but the work as a whole does not seem to have been performed by the society until April 9, 1859, when Mr. Anton Seidl, another ardent Lisztite (and, in passing, one of many musicians whom fate gossips has pointed to as one of the great Hungarian's children), had played the fantasia on themes from Beethoven's "The Ruins of Athens" and the E flat concerto when Bergmann was ready with two novelties of magnitude: on April 2, 1859, he produced the "Dante" Symphony, and on May 7 of the same year the Crusaders' Chorus from "The Legend of St. Elizabeth." In the final finale of the symphony Mr. Bergmann had the help of a chorus of boys (no doubt the choir of Trinity Church, for it was under the direction of Mr. Meister, who also played the organ), and, though the fact is not mentioned specifically on the programme, a chorus of men from the Männergesangverein Arlon, of which society Mr. Bergmann was conductor, sang the

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FRANZ LISZT.  
From a photograph.

not show itself in the falling off in the production of novelties, for, as has been seen, Bergmann almost exhausted the vocal supply. It is indicated, however, in this rather startling statement: Counting all manner of works with which it is associated—symphonies, symphonic poems (the marches have been all but ignored by all our conductors), transcriptions, piano forte solos and songs—the name appears on the Philharmonic programmes twenty-four times in the first decade after it had been introduced; in the next ten years, 1869-79, it appeared twenty-five times; in the next nine times, in the next eight times, and in the next nine times. Then came Mr. Mahler, with his love for brilliant sonority, and in two seasons gave his audiences eleven performances (not counting the repetitions occasioned by re-productions of the same programme in the subscription concerts), chiefly of "Mazeppa" and "Tasso." The interregnum filled by the "guest conductors" and the consulate of Safonoff brought only performances of "Les Preludes," by Kogel; "Tasso" and "Die Hunsenschlacht" (the latter outside the subscription) by Weinberg; "Les Preludes" by Herbert and "Two Episodes from Lienau's Faust" by Safonoff. For reference the following table of first performances of Liszt's greater works at concerts of the Philharmonic Society will be of interest—perhaps even valuable:

Works. Date. Conductor.  
"Les Preludes".....April 20, 1850. Bergmann.  
"Faust".....April 22, 1850. Bergmann.  
"Nimrod".....Dec. 26, 1850. Bergmann.  
"Orpheus".....April 26, 1862. Eisele.  
Coda from the "Grand Mass".....March 13, 1865. Bergmann.  
"Nachtling" Zug.....Nov. 17, 1865. Bergmann.  
"Quoniam"....Jan. 18, 1867. Bergmann.  
"Montagne".....Jan. 20, 1867. Bergmann.  
"Le quoniam sur la Montagne".....Jan. 21, 1867. Bergmann.  
"Dante" Symphony.....April 2, 1867. Bergmann.  
"Elizabeth," "Crusaders" choruses.....May 7, 1870. Bergmann.  
"Prometheus," "Shepherds".....Jan. 18, 1873. Bergmann.  
"Hunsenschlacht" for Dorf schenke.....Nov. 12, 1873. Neumann.  
"Gretchen" movement.....Feb. 2, 1876. Bergmann.  
"Dante" Symphony.....March 9, 1876. Thomas.  
"Prometheus".....Feb. 18, 1877. Seidl.  
"Prometheus," "Shepherds".....April 2, 1877. Seidl.

"Ach, was ist Leben doch so schwer!" (Hansel)

nothing either in the critical or popular attitude to change the opinion expressed by the present writer in 1858, when Liszt died. Those who do obeisance to his technical skill and deny him the possession of creative genius of the higher sort can find

abundance of proof in his published works. They can say with much justice that though genius may work long and laboriously at its products, and, as in the case

Continued on third page.

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